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SUBJECT: VATICAN CHARITY COMBATS HARSH CONDITIONS IN NORTH KOREA

REF: 01 VATICAN 1244

SUMMARY

1. VATICAN NGO, CARITAS HONG KONG, COORDINATES THE VATICAN'S RELIEF EFFORTS IN NORTH KOREA. THE ORGANIZATION HAS A SOLID WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DPRK GOVERNMENT. CARITAS REPORTS IMPROVEMENTS IN THE FOOD SITUATION AFTER MASSIVE INPUTS FROM INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, INCLUDING THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAM. OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, CARITAS PROVIDED MORE THAN 20 MILLION DOLLARS OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL AND DEVELOPMENT AID. ACCORDING TO CARITAS, NORTH KOREA'S GOVERNMENT HAS PULLED BACK SOMEWHAT FROM ENGAGEMENT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD, IN PARTICULAR THE U.S. AND SOUTH KOREA, AND HAS REDUCED ITS INTERNAL PROPAGANDA RHETORIC. CARITAS IS COMMITTED TO MAINTAINING AN ACTIVE PRESENCE IN NORTH KOREA. END SUMMARY.

SITUATION UP-DATE

2. EMBASSY OFFICERS RECEIVED A SITUATION UPDATE JANUARY 10 FROM CARITAS' NORTH KOREAN AID COORDINATOR KATHI ZELLWEGER WHO LAST VISITED THE DPRK IN NOVEMBER 2001, HER FIFTH ENTRY FOR THAT YEAR. ACCORDING TO ZELLWEGER, "PEOPLE ARE LIVING ON THE EDGE" - THE POPULATION HAS ENOUGH FOOD TO SURVIVE BUT NOT ENOUGH TO LEAD A HEALTHY LIFE. FOOD SHORTAGES ARE PARTICULARLY ACUTE IN THE EASTERN COASTAL DISTRICTS WHERE ARABLE LAND IS AT A MINIMUM AND URBAN-BASED NORTH KOREANS DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO PLOTS OF LAND FOR SUBSISTENCE GARDENING. CARITAS HONG KONG COORDINATES THE PROVISION OF FOOD INPUTS AND BASIC HEALTH CARE AT THE GRASS ROOTS LEVEL. (NOTE: CARITAS IS PART OF A FOOD AID LIAISON UNIT OPERATING OUT OF PYONGYANG. THE UNIT ALSO INCLUDES THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAM. END NOTE). ZELLWEGER NOTED THAT NORTH KOREAN CHILDREN ARE STUNTED - A CLEAR SIGN OF CHRONIC MALNUTRITION. ZELLWEGER SAYS MASSIVE FOOD AID - ONE MILLION TONS IN 2001 - HAS HAD AN IMPACT FOR THE BETTER AND NO DEVASTATING FAMINE IS ENVISAGED.

ON THE POLITICAL SCENE

3. ON THE POLITICAL SCENE, ZELLWEGER HAS NOTICED A REDUCTION IN PROPAGANDA RHETORIC COMING FROM THE GOVERNMENT. SHE EXPECTS THE SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY OF THE "BELOVED LEADER" TO BE CELEBRATED BY AN INCREASE IN FOOD RATIONS AND PERHAPS BY AN AMNESTY FOR CERTAIN CATEGORIES OF PRISONERS. ZELLWEGER OPINED THAT EXPECTATIONS RESULTING FROM THE "SUNSHINE SUMMIT" WERE OVER OPTIMISTIC. SHE BELIEVES FAMILY REUNIONS NEED TO BE REVIVED AS THE OLDER GENERATION IS DYING OUT AND

YOUNGER SOUTH KOREANS ARE LOSING THEIR "LINKS" TO THE DPRK. ACCORDING TO ZELLWEGER, THE DPRK IS "BACKING AWAY" FROM SOUTH KOREA AND THE U.S. SHE CONSIDERS THE UP-COMING WORLD SOCCER CUP MEDIA COVERAGE MAY HAVE A POSITIVE SPIN OFF REFOCUSING PUBLIC ATTENTION TO NORTH KOREA'S FOOD SHORTAGES AND RELATED ISSUES. ZELLWEGER SAYS PROTRACTED RELIEF OPERATIONS ARE NOT ATTRACTIVE TO POTENTIAL DONORS.

CARITAS PROJECTS

14. CARITAS SPONSORED PROJECTS IN NORTH KOREA INCLUDE A CHILDREN'S CLOTHING FACTORY PROVIDING WORK FOR WOMEN WHOSE SALARIES ARE PAID IN CASH AND FOOD. CARITAS ALSO SUPPORTS FISH FARMING - WORKING TO ENCOURAGE PRODUCTION INCREASES AND COOPERATIVE FARMS. CARITAS PROVIDES "KITS" TO FARMS CONTAINING TOOLS, SEEDS, MECHANICAL PARTS, FERTILIZERS AND PLASTIC SHEETING. ZELLWEGER SAID SOME OF THE COOPERATIVES HAVE A "FREEDOM" TO PLANT WHAT THEY WANT AND SO PRODUCE CASH CROPS SUCH AS TOBACCO. THE MONEY RAISED FROM CASH CROPS IS USED TO BUY OTHER ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS. AS WELL AS PROVIDING FOOD AID TO THE MOST VULNERABLE - WOMEN, CHILDREN, THE ELDERLY - CARITAS PROVIDES BASIC HEALTH CARE KITS. ZELLWEGER SAID THE HEALTH SYSTEM IS "DISMAL" AND THE ACUTE LACK OF SUPPLIES IS FRUSTRATING MEDICAL PERSONNEL. THE CARITAS HEALTH CARE KITS PROVIDE BASIC EQUIPMENT TO VILLAGE HOSPITALS AND CLINICS AS WELL AS A STABLE SUPPLY OF DRUGS - AT LEAST TWELVE MONTHS. (NOTE: ZELLWEGER SAID THE WHO HAS AN OFFICE IN PYONGYANG BUT THAT IT IS "DESPERATELY UNDER-FUNDED." END NOTE).

15. AN INDEPENDENT FIVE-YEAR REVIEW OF THEIR OPERATIONS CONDUCTED IN NOVEMBER 2001 RESULTED IN CARITAS COMMITTING TO STAY IN NORTH KOREA FOR THE LONG HAUL, HAVING ALREADY PROVIDED SOME 23 MILLION DOLLARS OF AID. FUTURE AID STRATEGIES WILL BUILD ON THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PAST SIX YEARS WITH FOOD AID, AGRICULTURE AND HEALTH AS THE MAIN SECTORS. THE MAIN GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS WILL BE ON THE EAST COAST PROVINCES.

COMMENT

16. ZELLWEGER IS A USEFUL EMBASSY CONTACT AS HER REGULAR SOJOURNS INTO NORTH KOREA PROVIDE US WITH A GOOD ASSESSMENT OF THE HUMANITARIAN AND, TO A LESSER EXTENT, POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY. ZELLWEGER WILL BE IN WASHINGTON IN THE SPRING AND POST HOPES TO FACILITATE MEETINGS FOR HER WITH STATE AND NGO OFFICIALS. SHE EXPRESSED INTEREST IN MEETING WITH CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES, CARITAS' U.S. BRANCH. END COMMENT.

NICHOLSON